

PLUTARCH'S *TABLE TALK*

KLOTZ (F.), OIKONOMOPOULOU (K.) (edd.) *The Philosopher's Banquet. Plutarch's Table Talk in the Intellectual Culture of the Roman Empire*. Pp. xx + 279. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Cased, £55, US\$99. ISBN: 978-0-19-958895-4.

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This volume was inspired by a colloquium on Plutarch's *Table Talk* (or *Quaestiones convivales*, *QC*), but the editors seek to do more than present a simple miscellany of conference papers. The eight essays, along with the brief introductory and concluding essays by the editors, are intended 'to mark a new departure' for interpreting the *QC* and to 'pursue a contextualized study of the work' in a systematic way (p. 3). In their introduction, K. and O. underscore the lack of attention paid to the *QC* as a work of literature, in comparison with the treatment of similar works such as Pliny's *Natural History*, Aulus Gellius' *Attic Nights* and Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae*. This omission, they argue, is a detriment to our understanding both of the work itself and of the literary, philosophical and cultural traditions of the Second Sophistic.

K. and O. establish the context for these studies with an informative survey of the three major traditions on which the *QC* draws and further develops. First, the literary symposium going back to Plato and Xenophon is an influence acknowledged by Plutarch in the preface to Book 1, although he has adapted the tradition to create a 'sympotic miscellany, closest to Xenophon's *Memorabilia*' (p. 15) that features a variety of topics, speakers, times and locations. (Plutarch himself appears in the dialogues at various stages of life, ranging from student to mature adult.) This form of symposium influenced Gellius and Macrobius, and perhaps Athenaeus and Apuleius. Second, the *QC* is an example of the literature of problems, a tradition going back to Aristotle, and one that Plutarch engaged with elsewhere in the *Moralia*. Third, the *QC* is classed among the imperial miscellanies, which themselves draw on a Peripatetic tradition. This type of writing has recently become a focus of scholarly interest (the editors cite König and Whitmarsh, *Ordering Knowledge in the Roman Empire* [2007]), a trend which further justifies the present study of Plutarch's text.

The essays are arranged in four sections, according to topic or approach. Two essays in 'Traditions' assess the wider context for approaching the *QC*. F. Titchener surveys trends in scholarship, describing an interpretative shift since the beginning of this century. Earlier work, including important commentaries, aimed at descriptive assessments, while work since 2002 has tended to treat the *QC* as a unified whole, applying critical theory and making comparative studies. Titchener reviews recent scholarship that represents the first steps in studying the *QC*'s place within the intellectual culture of its time. T. Morgan looks at genre, arguing that 'miscellany' should be interpreted broadly, to include not only the traditional notion of collections of facts or quotations culled from other sources, but also 'collections of poems, letters, biographies, or essays by a single author' (p. 52). She traces the development of the modern, narrow conception and considers the views of imperial authors, looking especially to Gellius' preface for the wide variety of texts that he claims are like his. Morgan contends that a broad conception of miscellany, which includes the *QC*, constitutes a ('perhaps the', p. 54) dominant genre of the imperial age.

There follow three essays categorised under 'Topics and Themes', which engage with philosophical and intellectual influences. E. Kechagia tackles philosophy in the *QC*, in two parts. First, in an examination of the text's literary form and Plutarch's programmatic statements, she argues that the aim of the collection is to demonstrate proper philosophical

dialogue at drinking parties. This dialogue entails the use of 'reasonable arguments, plausible inquiries, and theoretical contemplation' (p. 90) to take up a variety of philosophical and non-philosophical problems. Second, she considers the conversations themselves, concluding that the text serves as a guide for taking a philosophical approach to life. She argues convincingly that the many inconclusive inquiries are none the less intended to be beneficial, since they encourage the reader, in Platonic fashion, to seek a plausible explanation when absolute knowledge (about natural phenomena or the physical world) is unattainable. O. examines Peripatetic content, surveying how Plutarch's characters recall Aristotle in a variety of ways: as an authority, as a starting point for a discussion and to be set aside in favour of new arguments. O. connects this demonstration of Peripatetic knowledge to the intellectual culture of the Second Sophistic, arguing persuasively that Plutarch intended his readers to read the *QC* as a whole, rather than topically, as others have suggested. M. Vamvouri Ruffy finds conceptions of human anatomy and medicine to be fundamental influences on the text, especially in the terminology that Plutarch uses to describe a well-ordered symposium and the symposiarch's role in moderating or remedying his guests' behaviour. She further traces the application of this terminology beyond the symposium, to the larger political-social world that Plutarch and his guests inhabit.

Two essays categorised under 'Voice and Authority' examine Plutarch's role as narrator and participant. K. suggests that Plutarch presents himself as a Socrates-figure, a paradigm for teaching but also for learning, as Socrates taught the participants but also learned from Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*. K. demonstrates how Plutarch shapes the reader's perception of his complex role, presenting himself as a character who speaks authoritatively throughout the text, but ending the *QC* with a conversation that features Plutarch's teacher Ammonius interacting with Plutarch and other young men (9.14) and then speaking a monologue in the final 'conversation' of the book (9.15). K.'s argument supports O.'s contention and one of the underlying themes of the volume, that we should read the *QC* as a unified work, not a loosely organised collection of problems. J. König examines Plutarch's multi-faceted self-portrayal, showing how Plutarch strikes a balance between a display of his own learning and the promotion of 'sympotic community with one's fellow-symposiasts and with the authors of the past' (p. 190). In both the prefaces to the individual books and in the *quaestiones* themselves, Plutarch downplays his own importance by avoiding first-person references, instead combining his voice with those of other characters and frequently allowing others to take the lead or have the last word in a conversation. This technique, König argues, is in accord with ancient scholarly practice, where authors seek a balance between self-promotion and objectivity, but it also allows Plutarch to depict sympotic discussions in which the display of individual learning is held in check so as to foster a sense of community.

The final section, 'Contradictions', contains a single essay by C. Pelling that examines historical material shared between the *QC* and the *Lives*, but like König also takes up the question of Plutarch's self-presentation. Pelling shows how the topics discussed in the *QC* are predominately Greek, and so overlap mostly with the Greek *Lives*, even when Romans are speaking. Pelling relies on important work done on Plutarch's methods of research and composition in both the *Lives* and the *Moralia*, thereby drawing the *QC* into the mainstream of Plutarchan studies. He concludes by broaching the important question of whether the 'Plutarch' who appears in the *QC* (the learned symposiast) should be conceived of as the same 'Plutarch' who narrates the *Lives* (the historical biographer). He answers, 'perhaps', suggesting that the 'Plutarch' of the *QC* keeps his distance from the 'Plutarch' of the *Lives* by avoiding excessive self-promotion.

The editors have assembled a collection that offers insightful readings, new critical approaches and an expanded context for studying the *QC*. This volume gives serious

momentum to the recent scholarly trend that treats the text as a unified whole, and in the spirit of the *QC* itself it encourages further discussion.

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A CANADIAN VIEW OF THE SECOND SOPHISTIC?

SCHMIDT (T.), FLEURY (P.) (edd.) *Perceptions of the Second Sophistic and its Times*. (Phoenix Supplementary Volume 49.) Pp. xx + 273. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2011. Cased, C\$75. ISBN: 978-1-4426-4216-4.

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Collections of articles on Imperial Greek literature may be popular in Europe and the UK, but they remain rare on the other side of the Atlantic. The appearance of this volume, originating in a 2007 conference held at Laval in Québec City, is thus welcome, and evidence that the field is thriving in Canada; each of the fourteen contributors to this volume, eight writing in French and six in English, has an academic connection, past or present, to a Canadian university (p. xi). Is it possible to identify, then, a specifically Canadian way of perceiving the Second Sophistic on display here (or perhaps better *un regard Québécois*; ten of the authors have ties to Montréal, Québec or nearby Ottawa)? The somewhat anodyne title suggests a certain modesty of agenda, which is reflected in the predominantly literary, text-based approach favoured by nearly all the contributors, who tend towards strictly delimited analyses of passages, imagery or terminology from one or two ancient authors. No grand theorising or sweeping statements here. Such modesty, however, is one of the volume's virtues; the careful readings practised in the best of the essays make valuable contributions to our understanding of the complexity of Second Sophistic texts.¹

One thematic concern that runs through the volume is the relationship of religion and the rhetorical ideals of the Second Sophistic. Christian rhetoric is prominent in the articles by Pasquier and Henderson: the former contrasts the concept of the image in Philostratus' *Imagines* with that of Clement's *Protrepticus*, while the latter usefully articulates a concept of early Christian oratory (e.g. Paul) as a 'sub-' or 'counter-sophistic' movement that consciously mimics or adapts aspects of the dominant, elite sophistic paradigm. F., Downie and Côté, on the other hand, discuss how various Imperial Greek authors employ religious thought and imagery in their attempts to define the place of rhetoric in the Second Sophistic imagination. F. identifies what she terms a second-century 'resacralisation' of rhetoric, drawing from discussions in Fronto and Aristides that link oratorical ability with Nature and the divine. Downie takes this one step further, showing how Aristides manipulates such traditional religious metaphors (orators as 'initiates' into the 'mysteries' of rhetoric) as well as athletic ones (oratory as competition requiring intense physical training) for his own particular ends. With remarkable finesse, Downie unpacks the complex cluster of religious and athletic imagery employed at the crucial point in the *Sacred Tales* when Aristides narrates his recovery from illness and subsequent rebirth as an orator; the deftness and care with which she details Aristides' rhetorical sleight-of-hand make this

¹Summaries of the articles can be found in the editors' introduction (pp. ix–xx), as well as in the *BMCR* review (A. Makhlayuk, 2012.03.03).